the past and prejudice

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kūrmāya namah

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ROMILA THAPAR

LECTURE 1

IT is a strange paradox that the historian, who is concerned professionally with the past, plays a crucial role in the future of the society which he is studying. The historian's interest lies in trying to understand the emergence and the evolution of a society in a historical perspective, where the term society includes every aspect of a people's life. As a result of his investigations, the historian creates a picture of the society. In his handling of the evidence from the past, he is often influenced by his own contemporary setting. Historical interpretation can therefore become a two-way process—where, the needs of the present are read into the past, and where the image of the past is sought to be imposed upon the present. The image of the past is the historian's contribution to the future. For, this image can be used by his contemporaries for political mythmaking. Such political projections of a society seek intellectual justification from the theories of historians and other social scientists. To mention two recent and rather obvious examples, the theory of the superior Aryan race came in very useful to Hitler and the Fascists; and that of the Hindus and Muslims constituting two separate nations was used to justify the creation of Pakistan—a theory which has been recently exploded by events in Bangla Desh. Such supposed justifications impose the present on to the past and a generation is fed with distorted images.

But over the years, with changing methods of investigation, the discipline of history has been made more precise

*January 12, 1972.

and more analytical. New evidence and fresh interpretations enable us to reassess the past in more realistic terms and proceed in new directions. Historians, too, have become, as it were, self-conscious, both about the nature of the evidence and about the social and political function which historical writing has played in the past. Now, more than ever, the historian, without compromising his scholarly integrity, has much to contribute to society.

The modern writing of Indian history developed during the last two centuries. The needs of these times had encouraged the adoption of certain attitudes ard theories about the Indian past, which are now becoming increasingly irrelevant. The time has come for us to free ourselves from the necessary polemics of the history writing of the colonial period. We should acquire the confidence of critically assessing our own culture and history.

It is generally conceded that the history of the colonial period in India, of the last two centuries, is an unavoidable preface to an understanding of the present; it has a direct connection with the present. But I shall try in these lectures to suggest that even the more ancient part of the history of our country is relevant to the present. This can perhaps best be done by first discussing the image of the past which has so far been generally projected: an image which on occasion has led to deeply-rooted prejudices in the minds of both Indians and others. I shall then indicate the kind of evidence and interpretation, which is forcing historians to reconsider this image.

It is still a popular belief that the Indians were an a-historical people and kept no records of their history. The ancient Indians did keep records of those aspects which they felt were significant and worth preserving. It is true that most of these records do not deal with political events

and activities. They are more in the nature of genealogies, legends and monastic chronicles—all legitimate constituents of a historical tradition but not, unfortunately, very useful as a description of contemporary happenings. This latter type of record developed in the period after about A.D. 500. Court chronicles and historical biographies of considerable authenticity were maintained by the Turkish and Mughal courts and the tradition remained alive until recent times. So, when the Europeans arrived in India and began to look for histories of India, they found ample evidence on the period after about A.D. 1000. But the earlier centuries remained historically blurred. Even the factual records of this early period—the inscriptions—were written largely in the *Brāhmī* script, which could no longer be read by Indians. Consequently, the discovery of the Indian past was initiated under the auspices of the new rulers, the British. A major contradiction in our understanding of the entire Indian past is that this understanding derives largely from the interpretations of Indian history made in the last two hundred years.

There is a qualitative change between the traditional writing of history and history as we know it today. The modern writing of history was influenced in its manner of handling the evidence by two factors. One was the intellectual influence of the scientific revolution, which resulted in an emphasis on a systematic uncovering of the past and on checking the authenticity of historical facts. The other was the impact on the motivation of history by the new ideology of nationalism, with its stress on the notion of a common language, culture and history of a group. Indeed, historical studies the world over have assumed special significance in proving the background of nationalism.

Thus nationalism in Europe had led in the eighteenth

century to a new look at the European past. It was not however in that spirit that those who settled and colonised Asia and Africa, sought familiarity with the history of these regions. With the transformation of trading connections into colonial relations, the need to know the history of the colonies was based not merely on an intellectual curiosity but also on the exigencies of administration. If the norms, traditions and behaviour patterns of a colony were to be understood, then research into the history of the colony would have to be carried out.

The search for or discovery of the Indian past resulted in a number of interpretations of the past. These were notions which were constantly repeated since they were first enunciated and which have become stereotypes of Indian history and culture. Even though today they are being questioned, they are still widespread. Some of these stereotypes are related to the needs of imperialism, for economic imperialism had its counterpart in cultural domination. Historical writing coming from this source aimed at explaining the past in a manner which facilitated imperial rule. Others arose, in contrast, from Indian national sentiments opposed to the nature of imperial rule, and seeking justification in the reaning of the past. The ideology of Indian nationalism found not only political expression, but influenced every aspect of intellectual life—philosophy, literature, the arts and history—in the early twentieth century. The relationship with historians was especially close. The national movement itself had picked up facets from the reconstruction of the Indian past. Those historians who were sensitive to the stirrings of nationalism also responded to these facets. Because of the cultural domination implicit in imperialism, nationalism of the anti-colonial variety had to incorporate a programme of cultural natio-

nalism as well, in order to regenerate the indigenous culture. The intellectual content of nationalism arose out of the need for Indians to react to the experience of colonialism, industrialisation and economic backwardness. Paucity of evidence also assisted in the creation of the stereotypes. Some of the recent questioning has been necessitated by greater and improved evidence. The more persistent of the stereotypes have dominated not only historical interpretation but have become the foundation of modern political ideologies.

That Indian society has always been an unchanging society, based on a caste structure, which in turn made it oppressive and averse to any change, or alternatively, that it was an idyllic society characterised by harmony and an absence of social tension—a utopian society; these beliefs are still with us. The first of these notions encouraged the development of the theory of Oriental Despotism. This had been popular in Europe for long and was revived in the nineteenth century with reference to the past of Asia. Yet another stereotype was the sharp distinction between the nature of Oriental and Occidental culture; where the Oriental was described as spiritual and unconcerned with material culture, the Occidental was branded as obsessed by material values. In the words of Vivekananda:

> "...To the Oriental the world of Spirit is as real as to the Occidental is the world of senses. In the spiritual, the Oriental finds everything he wants or hopes for; in it he finds all that makes life real to him..."[1]

The dichotomy between Oriental and Occidental was not the only one which came to dominate Indian historical thinking. Two other dichotomies were introduced which

[1] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, IV. p. 150.

have served political, rather than historical, purposes. The Aryan—non-Aryan distinction was based on a supposed racial difference. The myth of two separate nations was developed to explain away, and sometimes even to justify, cases of tension between Hindus and Muslims. What is most striking about all these stereotypes is that they do not occur as facts in the cultural tradition of pre-British India.

The notion of an Aryan *race* is alien to the Indian tradition. There are frequent references in early literature to the *āryas*, either in the sense of the more honoured persons of society or else, as distinct from the *mleccha* and the *an-ārya*. The criteria of difference are primarily language and the observance of the *varṇāśramadharma*, that is, the organisation of society on the basis of caste and the prescription of the four stages in the life of a man. In the very early texts additional differences are recognised as those of appearance, and religious worship. But, very soon after, the criteria of language and culture alone remained. The Aryans are seen as a separate cultural group but not as a distinct race. This is also borne out in the early sources where there are references to the *āryavarta*, the land of the *āryas*. The definition of the *āryavarta* varies in each group of sources in accordance with the culture which the source represents and the geographical location of its nuclear area. The later Vedic texts speak of *āryavarta* as essentially the Ganga-Yamuna Doab and its fringes. Lands beyond this are generally listed as *mleccha-deśa*. Thus we are told that Magadha and Aṅga (Patna, Gaya, Monghyr and Bhagalpur districts in Bihar) are inhabited by the *sankīrna-jātis* (mixed castes) and are unfit for the *ārya*. In Jaina sources however, these regions are listed as a part of the *āryavarta*, as also in the Buddhist sources where the location of *āryavarta* is distinctly to the east of the Doab, in the modern Rajmahal

area. By the time of Manu, *āryavarta* was defined more or less as northern India, north of the Vindhyas.[2] Race is not the criterion and obviously could not be, for the concept of race both in the scientific and the popular sense is a product of modern Europe.

Again, Indians in the pre-eighteenth century never claimed that they were more spiritual than other peoples, or that the Indian way of life was concerned solely with things spiritual. The ideal of the earlier texts that the best life on earth is a balance between *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*, shows a healthy unconcern for any obsession with either the spiritual or the material. As for the static, unchanging quality of Indian society, this is also contrary to what is said in Indian sources. There are frequent references to changes in society some of which are approved and others deplored. Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic cosmology state that society is perpetually undergoing change. From an initial utopian condition, society has not only changed but deteriorated. Ultimately however, it will move towards the return of the utopia, be it a fresh *Satyayuga* or a final Judgment Day. From where then did these stereotypes emerge and why did they receive the sanction of recent times? For an answer one has to look at the intellectual and political background of the last two centuries in India and Europe.

It is worth noticing that the colonial period of other Asian countries also reflects similar stereotypes in the historical interpretation of the past. The search for a superior race, the claim to spirituality and the description of

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Baudhāyana, I. 2. 13 among others lists Magadha and Aṅga as being unfit for āryas. The Jaina *Bhagavatīsutra* and the Buddhist *Mahāvagga V*. 12.13 and *Divyāvadāna* p. 22 place the *āryavarta* to the east. Manu, II. 21-23.

an unchanging, utopian past, are all concepts in the history of other Asian cultures and have been projected during recent decades.

The propagation of these stereotypes is to be found initially in the writings of two main categories of people—scholars and administrators. At the level of pure scholarship, in this case the discovery of evidence, the work was both meticulous and inspiring. At the level of historical assumptions and interpretations however, the stereotypes intruded. The degree to which the stereotype was accepted varied from one scholar to another.

Among scholars, the most effective propagation of some of these views are to be found in the writings of Max Müller. He represents a group of European Indologists who were extremely sympathetic to Indian culture and acted as a counter to those who were proclaiming despotism and backwardness as symbolic of the Indian past. The excitement at discovering a close linguistic affinity between Greek and Sanskrit led to the study of philology, the comparative study of languages. This resulted in the vision of a vast Aryan race which was regarded as the originator of Indian and European culture. In a sense therefore, the study of Sanskrit was also the discovery of a lost wing of early European culture. Max Müller described the speakers of Sanskrit as:

> " ...our nearest intellectual relatives the Aryans of India, the framers of the most wonderful language of Sanskrit, the fellow workers in the construction of our most fundamental concepts, the fathers of the most natural of natural religions, the makers of the most transparent of mythologies, the inventors of the most subtle philosophy and the givers of the most elaborate

laws. . ."[3]

The exalted idea of the Aryans was extended to the whole system of seeming Indian values, which Max Muller wrote of, as being,

> " . .not the active, combative or acquisitive, but the passive, meditative and reflective. . ."[4]

This idealisation saw its logical culmination in Blavatsky, Mrs. Annie Beasant and the Theosophical movement—and possibly, in its more recent and on-going manifestation, in the Hare Krishna cult. This picture of perfection encompassed even the idyllic view of the nineteenth century village community, which Max Muller saw as the nucleus of Indian life, spiritual values and social harmony. Perhaps if he had visited India even once, he might not have indulged in this considerable feat of imagination.

Deriving from the writings of the comparative philologists was the theory of a parent Indo-European language. This was regarded as the source of a number of later languages, among them Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Celtic, Teutonic, Iranian and Tocharian, all of which, because they were inter-related languages, were spoken by the members of the Aryan race. In India, Vedic literature was seen as the manifestation of this Aryan race, which race was believed to have conquered and enslaved the existing inhabitants and spread across the sub-continent. The racial exclusiveness of the Aryans, it was held, was protected by the caste system where a clear distinction was maintained between the Aryans and the non-Aryans. The brahmans were looked upon as having carefully preserved the pure Aryan strain. The identity of the non-Aryans was settled fairly

[3] *What Can India Teach Us ?* p. 15.
[4] *Ibid*, p. 101.

quickly. In Europe they were represented by the Semitic peoples—the Jews. In India, they were the Dravidians, the tribals and the various low castes. Thus, the Aryan-Dravidian dichotomy was also introduced. The error committed by the philologists was to equate language with race—an error which Max Müller recognised in his later writings, but by then the concept of the Aryan race had come to stay. It would seem that, since language played a significant role in the rise of European nationalism, it was regarded as a criterion of race as well, the distinction between nation and race being somewhat unclear at the time. To create a race out of inter-related languages is a situation comparable to one which may face the historian in A.D. 4000 if he should suggest that all those parts of the world in which English came to be spoken by the mid-twentieth century, were settled by the same race.

The idealisation of the Indian past was also in a sense an attempt to find a utopia outside Europe. In the mid-nineteenth century, Europe was undergoing what was, to many, a bewildering social and economic change. In the process of industrialisation accepted values were being questioned and radically altered. There was a consequent period of alienation and a reaction to 'combative and acquisitive' values. This is linked further with the determined attempt of scholars, such as Max Müller, to counter the exaggeratedly negative assessment of the Indian past by the Evangelicals and the Utilitarians, and by some among the administrators of the empire.

The picture painted by the Evangelicals was on the whole black and bleak. The rationale was that the only salvation for India lay in conversion to Christianity. Some among them were appreciative of certain aspects of Indian culture, but the final diagnosis was negative. The Utilitarian

thinkers of the nineteenth century saw themselves as the philosophers of rationalism. They attributed the backwardness of India to what they described as its predominantly irrational culture, the lack of a legal system, its stagnant society and the existence of despotism. James Mill was particularly vociferous in his attack. His analysis came in very handy to British administration since he maintained that legislation could change a society. This was, in a sense, a sanction to the British administration to legislate change in its own interests. Mill's criticism of what he called the Hindu system of taxation, which, according to him, did not provide for either free trade or the free play of capital, also met with the approval of those who were formulating British economic policy in India. His emphasis on Oriental Despotism suited the requirements of an imperial government. Not surprisingly, Mill's *History of British India* became a basic text in Haileybury College, where the civil servants proceeding to India were trained.

From the start, Oriental Despotism had been a favourite European generalisation on Asia. It is first found in Greek writing, particularly in the descriptions of their traditional enemy, the Achaemenid empire of Persia. Despotism was associated with the imperial system and with the fabulous wealth of the Persian court. The continued association of Asia with despotism and luxury is apparent from the literature of Rome and of the Byzantine and medieval Europe. Changing political ideas in Europe in the eighteenth century, focussing on the question of private property in land, individual rights and democracy, coincided with the reports of travellers to India that there was an absence of private property in land, in India. In this context the discussion on Oriental Despotism was revived. But the concept remained vague in its application and ambiguous in

its definition. It was Karl Marx who formalised it into a system of political economy by his theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production. He projected a static society of village communities totally subject to the king. Others writing on the village community had mitigated the evils by suggesting that these communities enjoyed a degree of political autonomy. Certain notions about the village community emerged from the romanticism relating to early societies and it was seen as the initial phase in the evolution of society. But, as it has been recently said, Marx shifted the emphasis from political autonomy to economic autarchy.[5]

Marx was totally opposed to the interests of British imperialism. Yet, even he saw the coming of the British as the means by which despotism in India could be terminated.

> "...England it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind *fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the* social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution. ."[6]

Theories such as Oriental Despotism were not, by and large, attacked directly by Indian nationalist historians, mainly, because these theories were regarded as too exaggerated to even merit challenging. The nature of British imperialism, however, came in for attack. It was held responsible for the lack of modern economic development and the impoverishment of the peasantry. Dadabhai

[5] Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 158.

[6] *On Colonialism*, p. 41. "The British Rule in India".

Naoroji and Romesh Chandra Dutt were the most articulate in condemning the economic policies of the British in India. At the cultural and historiographical level, however, those European writers who had idealised the Indian past came in for adulation. Their ideas were incorporated into various nationalist views on the past.

Inevitably the supposed Aryan race stirred the imagination of a section of the nationalists. Caste Hindus were regarded as the descendants of the ancient Aryans, and the historic superiority of their culture was repeatedly stressed. As a result, the racial and religious unity of India, *via* the Hindus, became an axiom. Comparative philology having indicated a close relationship between Sanskrit and Greek, it was assumed that the Indo-Aryans were the originators of civilisation. Hence, the need to prove not only the antiquity of everything Indian but also to establish that culture diffused from India to the rest of the world. The cultural revival became entangled with the religious revival. In some circles the regeneration of India was expected only through the restoration of Hindu culture. One of the characters in Bankim Chander Chatterjee's novel, *Ānandamaṭha*, explains that British rule in India was predestined, in order that the pristine power of Hinduism be born. Aurobindo describes nationalism as:

> "...not a mere political programme. Nationalism is a religion that has come from God ...if you are going to be a nationalist, if you are going to assent to this religion of nationalism, you must do it in the religious spirit ...When it is said that India shall expand and extend itself, it is the *Sanatan Dharma* that shall expand and extend itself over the world..."[7]

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[7] *Speeches*, p. 7 and p. 76.

The Aryan theory of race had many advantages. Upper caste Indians could seek identity with the British rulers, for, in the words of Keshab Chunder Sen,

> "...in the advent of the English nation in India we see a reunion of parted cousins, the descendants of two different families of the ancient Aryan race ..."[8]

Some of the pseudo-scientific theories of caste also took their origin from this view.

It is inherent in the nature of colonialism that it encourages separatism in the colony. The end result is a society with two or more groups vying for political power and insisting on their cultural separateness. The situation is familiar to many ex-colonies of Asia, Africa and Europe. Revivalism therefore further sharpens this separation, since each group searches for divergent roots. The definition of the national culture in these circumstances becomes an acrimonious debate. In India the Hindus and the Muslims were seen as having two contending cultures. The contention derived justification from Mill's periodisation of Indian history into three distinct and disparate periods—the Hindu, the Muslim and the British; as well as from the growing communal trend of contemporary politics. Many among the Hindus turned to the Aryan race and the Vedic literature for their origin, and, among the Muslims, to pristine Islam. Muhammad Iqbal writes:

> "...One lesson I have learnt from the history of Muslims. At critical moments in their history it is Islam that has saved Muslims and not *vice versa*. If today you focus your vision on Islam and seek inspiration from the ever vitalising idea embodied in it, you will be only reassembling your scattered forces, regaining your lost integrity and thereby saving yourself from total destruction..."[9]

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[8] *Keshab Chunder Sen's Lectures in India*, p. 323.

[9] *Speeches and Statements*, *p*. 36.

Those committed to reform were less happy with the call of the revivalists. For them the past had played its role and could not be reinstituted in entirety. Perhaps Ranade best sums up the line of argument in his rejection of revivalism, when he writes:

"...What shall we revive? .the men and the gods of those old days ate and drank forbidden things to excess in a way no revivalist will now venture to recommend. Shall we revive the twelve forms of sons, or eight forms of marriage, which included capture and recognised mixed and illegitimate intercourse? Shall we revive the Niyoga system of procreating sons on our brother's wives when widowed? Shall we revive the old liberties taken by the rishis and by the wives of the rishis with the marital tie? Shall we revive the hecatombs of animals sacrificed from year's end to year's end, and in which human beings were not spared as propitiatory offerings?..."[10]

A more radical attack on Hindu revivalism came from some, such as Jotirao Phule, who had begun to challenge the elite outlook on the past. The assumption, never explicitly stated, was that brahman ard other upper-caste intellectuals belonging to the newly emerging middle-class, which was now also the new social elite, would naturally idealise ancient Indian society, since the values they drew from the past coincided with the ones which were to their advantage in the present. Jotirao Phule, speaking for some of the lower sections of society, insisted on seeing both the social reality and the theories about the past in a different light. The terms *śūdra* and *ati-śūdra* were used to describe Indian social organisation, thus removing the emphasis from the brahman and placing it on the role of the *śūdra*. In these circles anti-brahmanism was symbolic of the

[10] *Indian Social Reform*, Part II, p. 89-90.

antagonism not only to the traditional elite, but also the new social elite. Inevitably the notion of Aryan superiority came in for attack and the Aryans, with the brahmans as their descendants, were projected as aliens who had enslaved the indigenous population.[11] Thus, the stereotype was not questioned: it was merely turned upside down.

Meanwhile, the belief in the spirituality of India had grown in strength. Nor did successive decades of modern education weaken this notion. By the end of the nineteenth century Indian spirituality had become a crusade. Vivekananda writes:

> "...This is the great ideal before us and everyone must be ready for it—the conquest of the whole world by India...Up India, and conquer the world by your spirituality...We must go out, we must conquer the world through our spirituality and philosophy..."[12]

The rejection of materialism became such a dominant theme that it gradually got woven into an anti-machine complex. This is, to some extent, a characteristic sentiment of certain sections of those societies which are in the early phase of industrialisation. In India the machine was associated with western domination. It was also seen as the harbinger of social change of such a magnitude that both society and the local culture were likely to be transformed beyond recognition. And, finally, the machine broke the existing economy and introduced the problems of industrialisation. It was the fear of losing a familiar world and moving into what appeared to be the unknown. Whereas the nationalists of the nineteenth century were eager to

[11] G. Omvedt, "Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, VI, No. 37, September 11, 1971.

[12] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, III, p. 276.

accelerate industrialisation, which they saw as a panacea for economic ills, some of the nationalists of the twentieth century saw it as an evil. The latter advocated at least a *status quo* if not return to village society. Mahatma Gandhi, for his own reasons, took pride in an absence of technological change.

> "... We have managed with the same kind of plough as existed thousands of years ago. We have retained the same kind of cottages that we have had in former times and our indigenous education remains the same as before... It was not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre..."[13]

The machine thus became symbolic of the difference between the materialist and the spiritual soceties. The two were seen as diametrically opposed. Inevitably, pre-industrial societies were regarded as the more spiritual. This in turn reinforced the notion of the spirituality of the Indian pre-industrial past.

The projection of this general image of the past was due to a variety of reasons. At one level, there was gratitude towards those who had said flattering things about Indian culture. At another level, glorification of the past became a compensation for the humiliation of the present. At yet another and even more effective level, revivalism infused self-confidence and militancy into the nationalist ideology. Historical writing on the pre-modern period was coloured by this militancy and revivalism.

Of the historians influenced by the communal politics of the 1930's and 1940's some tended to exaggerate the glory

[13] *Hind Swaraj*, p. 276.

of the Hindu period, as they called it, and to contrast it with the supposed decline of Hindu culture during the Muslim period when India was regarded as having come under foreign rule. Others, dominated by Muslim communalism, treated Indian history as if it began with Mahmud of Ghazni and saw the Muslim period as the triumph of Islam over the infidel. Communal politics were reflected in the interpretations of this period which were distorted by the argument of a perpetual Hindu-Muslim conflict. Both Hindu and Muslim historians of these persuasions shared the common error that religious differences were central to all Hindu and Muslim inter-relationships. Secular nationalists with rare exceptions, in trying to combat the communal interpretation kept reiterating Hindu-Muslim harmony during the medieval period, without analysing to any meaningful extent the causes of either discord or of harmony. Such analyses might have pointed to other and more viable methods of historical investigation, as indeed they have done in more recent years. The most significant question facing the historians of the time, namely, the understanding of the historical aspects of the backwardness of the present, tended to get ignored.

The ancient period became the golden age. The antiquity of Indian civilisation was pushed back by dating the Vedic literature to 4000 B.C. or even earlier.[14] In order to emphasise the national unity of India since the earliest times, generalisations were made on the history of the sub-continent, essentially from the perspective of the Ganges valley."[15] This is in part responsible for the paro-

[14] e.g., B. G. Tilak, *Arctic Home in The Vedas*, and *Orion*.

[15] This was the case in most standard histories of India until recent years. Even the more important political powers of other parts of the sub-continent, such as the Pālas, the Coḷas, the Cālukyas, etc., receive proportionately less attention.

chial historical perspective which is emerging from some regional histories today. Critical opinion on India was sought to be countered by proving that the liberal values in fashion in Britain were all available in the Indian cultural and political past. Thus kingship in ancient India was seen as a kind of constitutional monarchy, forgetting that such an interpretation was anachronistic.[16] Interest in social history tried to justify the caste structure. But the brahmans continued to be accepted as the inheritors of the Aryan tradition and of Aryan genes.

The juxtaposition of militant nationalism glorifying military power, with the claim that non-violence was a traditional Indian norm of behaviour, did not produce the dilemma one might have expected. Militant nationalism was more frequently reflected in historical writing, although homage was paid to the concept of non-violence. Whereas the Mauryan emperor, Aśoka, was extolled by some for his policies based on *ahimsā* and his renunciation of conquest through violence, others condemned him equally strongly for being a pacifist and weakening the defences of his empire precisely through his policy of non-violence.[17] The conquerors emerged as the heroes of history. Thus, the importance of Samudragupta was magnified because of his military campaigns taking him as far south as Kanchipuram. Curiously, the eleventh century campaign of the armies of the Cōḷa king Rajendra, taking a route similar to those of Samudragupta and coming as far north as the Ganges, is rarely mentioned in these historical writings. Rajput chivalry, based on an intensively militant tradition, with

[16] K. P. Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, II, p. 60 ff.

[17] This is apparent if one compares the treatment of the historical activity of Aśoka Maurya in the monograph *Ashoka* by R. G. Bhandarkar and the section on the emperor in H.C. Raychudhuri's *Political History of Ancient India*, p. 363.

little use for *ahimsā* was nevertheless eulogised. Rana Pratap among the Rajputs and Shivaji among the Marathas became popular idols, catering both to nationalist sentiment and to communal prejudice. In our own times, that Gandhi believed in non-violence as a superior ethic is beyond doubt, but it appeared to many of his followers as an effective technique against the British.

Various streams emerged out of nationalist historical writing. Among them one was the continuation of the communal bias with a sharp demarcation between the Hindu and Muslim interpretation, although the underlying historical assumptions were similar. Another grew out of an interest in regional history. In terms of discovering local source material and providing a more balanced perspective on the history of the sub-continent, this was a much needed departure. But in many cases, because of conforming to existing stereotypes, the result is not a new historical insight, but the subordination of history to regional chauvinism. Yet another, and a less publicised one, was the response by historians to the challenge of imperialist history writing and the attempt to come to terms with the reality of the Indian past, without entering into the polemics of the degree to which it was glorious or vile.

Nationalist historical writing was serving, consciously or subconsciously, the larger cause of nationalism. Nevertheless, its impact on historical interpretation was enormous. It was, in effect, a renewed challenge to those who had denigrated the Indian past. Thus the debate was extended and now included Indian scholars, who combined meticulous research with a tenacity and commitment it was impossible to ignore. In a sense, the coming of independence terminated the debate, at least in its overt and recognisable form. But the stereotypes bandied about in this debate persist,

and appear in new forms.

The current debate on Indian under-development, its cause and its future, ties up closely with these stereotypes. A recent work on the subject makes the following statement:

> "Hindu culture and Hindu social organisation are determining factors in India's low rate of development."[18]

This is not an isolated statement. It occurs in some of the early sociological writings on India. These writings depended largely on Indological studies of the nineteenth century and accepted the major stereotypes. Max Weber, for example, in his studies on religion and society in India, stressed the emphasis on other-worldliness among the Hindus and the socially inflexible nature of caste society, both of which obstructed attempts at economic change. In our own times, analyses of under-development in modern Asia, such as Gunnar Myrdal's *Asian Drama*, tend to utilise the earlier theories without adequately considering more recent investigations into the nature of Indian society and social change. Those with a more narrowly economic concern often resort to the theory of oriental despotism as providing the background to economic backwardness. The theory of the instinctive unconcern of Indians for worldly things is found particularly useful in minimising such obvious factors as colonialism in economic under-development. The explanation of Indian economic backwardness does not lie in simplistic generalisations on Hindu culture but demands a detailed investigation into the nature of pre-colonial and colonial society in India.

A realistic assessment of the past is therefore of more than just historical value. Such an assessment involves questioning the stereotypes which have been current in

[18] K. W. Kapp, *Hindu Culture, Economic Development and Economic Planning in India*, p. 64.

recent centuries. Among these stereotypes, as we have seen, were the Aryan theory of race, the concept of an unchanging Indian society, the notion of the other-worldliness of Indians obstructing economic advance and the theory of Oriental Despotism. This process of questioning often results in new perspectives or reveals new insights, particularly when fresh evidence becomes available and leads to a refashioning of the image of the past.

The questioning of the stereotypes is largely in order to determine the extent to which they are factually correct or reflections of the needs of recent times. New approaches do not lie merely in turning old stereotypes upside down or in replacing them with new ones. What is required is a logical analysis utilising the most recent evidence, and, where it is of help, recent methodology.

In the next two lectures I shall attempt an explanation of some aspects of the Indian past using the methods now employed in the historical investigation of early periods. This will in turn help to ascertain the extent to which the existing stereotypes continue to have any historical validity. It is not my intention in these lectures to reconstruct or define the Indian past. I wish merely to indicate the kinds of analyses which can be made and their relevance to our society.

LECTURE II*

IT is indeed anachronistic that the beginnings of Indian civilisation are frequently traced to Vedic literature whereas a more advanced culture preceded it in the third millenium B.C.—the Harappa culture, or what is alternatively known as the Indus civilisation. This anachronism is partly due to a hesitancy to use archaeological evidence, in the belief that literary sources are more reliable. Archaeology, since it is concerned with the discovery and interpretation of the material remains of the past, provides evidence on two significant areas of investigation. One is the study of technology, the answer to how cultures changed. The other is the evidence on the environment or the ecology.[1] Both of these assist in a more realistic assessment of the period concerned. Fresh evidence of any major importance is now likely to come only from archaeological sources, since the literary sources have been fairly thoroughly combed. Since the Harappan script still remains undeciphered, the earliest literary sources would be the Vedic literature. The reluctance also derives, in part, from the wish to present the Aryan peoples as the founders of Indian culture. But cultures do not disappear as long as there are human beings who have survived. This is particularly so with advanced, urban cultures, since their impact is not restricted to cities alone, but is apparent in the rural cultures which surround them. Such urban centres may physically decline but their cultural tradition very often absorbs the usages introduced

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*January 13, 1972

[1] Recent studies in palaeo-botany and pollen analysis in India are providing significant information on some aspects of the cology of early periods in time.

by newcomers. Recent archaeological excavations have revealed a series of cultures from the later Harappan period onwards, with sites located in western India, the Malwa region, the Indo-Gangetic watershed and the upper Doab, which indicate that there were survivals from the Harappa culture.[2] Thus, whoever the Harappans were, it is to them that Indian civilisation must be traced.

The theory that an Aryan invasion destroyed the Harappan cities is now seriously doubted. Only in one city, Mohenjo-daro, is there evidence of violence towards the end, and even this is attributed to other causes. Among the more plausible theories is that there was a geological movement in Sind which disturbed the river systems in Sind, Rajasthan and the upper Ganges valley. There is evidence of considerable and repeated flooding at Mohenjo-daro. It is not unlikely that this, together with the particular type of irrigation prevalent in Harappan times, may perhaps have led to extensive salination, or at any rate resulted in ecological changes which introduced desert conditions on a large scale. That there was an ecological change of some magnitude is evident from the fact that urbanisation ceased in this part of the Indus plain. It emerged afresh in a totally new geographical area, the Ganges valley, and under new auspices.

The new urbanisation emerged from a variety of archaeological cultures. It is however impossible to identify with certainty any of these as Aryan. It is only because the period generally assigned to Vedic literature coincides with the time of these cultures, that this urbanisation is sometimes described as Aryan. Nor can we speak with certainty

[2] This is seen particularly in the continuity of certain traits from late Harappan levels into other cultures. A brief summary is contained in B. and R. Allchin's *The Birth of Indian Civilisation*, pp. 179—206.

of these populations as belonging to the Aryan race. If ever there had been a pure Aryan race in India, the likelihood of its having survived for long is rather remote. At any rate, the survival of such a race into modern times is quite unacceptable. Scientific biology no longer accepts the fact of the continued existence of a pure race, since the inter-mixture of peoples throughout history has tended to eliminate racial purity. Even in remote and isolated areas where ethnic groups have survived, their racial purity cannot be taken for granted. That the Ṛg Vedic people speak of the *dasyus* as dark and snub-nosed[3] suggests that they themselves may have been narrow-nosed and fair, but this is at best inferential evidence, and cannot be cited in favour of their being a distinct biological unit.

From the point of view of historical certainty, the term Aryan can only refer to those who spoke an Aryan language—at that time, Sanskrit—and who conformed to a certain cultural pattern. It is, however, true that, culturally, the Ṛg Vedic people differed substantially from the Harappans. Whereas the latter were urban city dwellers, using a copper technology, the Ṛg Vedic people were primarily pastoral and nomadic, with their economy geared to cattle-rearing, and gradually changing to agriculture. Even the deities they worshipped appear to have been different, as also the religious rites.

The other three and later Vedic texts—the *Sāma*, *Yajur* and *Atharva-vedas*—are significantly different from the *Ṛg Veda*, in terms of the society they represent. The geographical focus is no longer Punjab and Haryana but has shifted to the Doab and the middle Ganges valley. It shows a society which has moved from pastoralism to a peasant

[3] The *Ṛg Veda* mentions *kṛṣṇa tvac* in I, 130.8 and IX, 41.1; *anās* in V, 29.10.

society with the beginnings of city-life. There is virtually no evidence to prove that this geographical location was conquered. It has been suggested, therefore, that the later Vedic literature represents a cultural mingling of the speakers of the Indo-Aryan language with those already settled in these areas. The linguistic evidence strongly supports this idea. It is interesting that there are words of Dravidian origin in the *Ṛg Veda*.[4] These words were incorporated into Vedic Sanskrit. Linguistic investigation into the historical development of Sanskrit indicates that the major borrowing from Dravidian took place in the period between about 1000 B.C. and 500 B.C., what is generally described as the later Vedic period. This would suggest that there may have been a proto-Dravidian speaking population in the Ganges valley and in northern India generally, and that the present day Brahui, Kurukh and Malto languages are their remnants. In the evolution of Sanskrit, there is evidence of non-Aryan phonetics, which are not to be found in the other languages derived from Indo-European.[5]

The historian, therefore, cannot but doubt the theory that a large number of Aryans conquered northern India, enslaved the existing population and thereby established their language and culture, both entirely alien to the indigenous tradition. It has to be conceded that, if there was a conquest, it was limited to parts of the extreme north. It is more likely that groups of Aryan speaking peoples migrated into northern India, and settled and mixed with the indigenous population. The culture that resulted evolved

[4] T. Burrow, *Sanskrit*, pp. 373—388, M.B. Emenau, *Collected Papers*, p. 148, p. 155.

[5] A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, p. 387. The retroflex consonants in particular—ṭ ṭh ḍ ḍh, ṇ—appear to be alien to Indo-European.

from this interaction. The widespread adoption of the Indo-Aryan language in northern India was a major expression of this new culture. Such a phenomenon takes on the dimensions of a social force and has to be seen historically in that light.

The diffusion of a language does not depend on conquest alone. Frequently in history, a language spreads because it is associated with an advanced technology. At the beginning of the first millenium B.C. two innovations of great consequence appear on the Indian scene. One was the extensive use of the horse, an animal comparatively new to the sub-continent, and the other was a familiarity with iron technology. The evidence for this comes not only from the excavation sites, which reveal iron objects and large numbers of horse bones and trappings, but also from literature which frequently mentions the *aśva*, horse, and the *kṛṣṇa-ayas*, the dark metal. The spoked-wheel chariot drawn by the horse was a technological advance in transportation over the ox-drawn cart. The use of iron improved on a variety of skills which had previously depended on the less durable and weaker metals of copper and bronze. Frequent references to the solar calendar in literature point to an improvement in astronomy and mathematics at the time. Astronomy and meteorology helped to make sowing, harvesting and irrigation more efficient. Improved geometry not only led to the building of more elaborate sacrificial enclosures, but also a more competent division of the fields, not to mention its use in the construction of buildings. The new technology appears to have coincided with the diffusion of the Aryan speakers. The association of Sanskrit with the introduction of an advanced technology may have led to its wide acceptance. It is significant that in those areas of the sub-continent, where an iron technology was already in

existence—through the megalithic culture of the peninsula—the situation was different. Here, Dravidian remained the predominant language group.

A similar process occurred in Iran and in Greece at a comparable period. It is curious that of the culture of these areas the major link with Indian culture was the Indo-European root of the classical language. If there had been an effective conquest of these areas by an identical Aryan race, then surely the historical development of many of the social institutions would have been similar. It would appear that the pre-Aryan institutions remained in force, the major change being mainly the adoption of a new language and the evolving of a new culture among the elite sections of society. The history of many parts of south-east Asia, particularly in relation to Indian culture, suggests a similar process in a later period.

This therefore requires a fresh assessment of the evolution of social forms and an attempt to analyse how a society was organised, the degree to which its forms remained unchanged, and the nature of social changes when they occurred. In India, social organisation took the form of a caste structure, and this has continued to the present day. The theory of the system is contained in the idea of *varṇa*. The four *varṇas* are first mentioned in a hymn of the *Ṛg Veda* as emerging from the sacrifice of primeval man. The verses read:

"When they divided Puruṣa how many portions did they make.
What do they call his mouth, his arms, what do they call his thighs and feet.
The brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the *rājanya* made
His thighs became the *vaiśya*, from his feet the *śūdra* was produced..."

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* *Ṛg Veda* X. 90. Translated by R. T. H. Griffith.

This is the only reference to the four *varṇas* as an entity in the *Ṛg Veda*, and it is held that this section was composed later than the rest of the book. The verses are clearly an attempt to find an origin in the form of a myth, for an existing situation.

It is possible that the elements which went into the making of a caste structure existed in the Harappan period. It is clear from the pattern of settlement of the Harappan cities that there were at least three major divisions of society. To these the fourth may have been added later, or else there may have been a reorganisation of social groups within the structure.

The characteristics of a caste society are—the existence of *jātis*, which are hereditary groups determining marriage relations; these are arranged in a hierarchical order according to occupation, and they perform, on the basis of this hierarchy, various services for each other—what came to be called later, *jajmāni* relations. These relationships are the bases for economic functions. The hierarchy is often defined by the nature of the work, the purest profession being that of the priest, and the most polluting that of the scavenger. The two ends of the scale being easily recognisable, the distinction between the brahman and the untouchable is clear. But the ranking of the intermediate positions often varies from region to region.

Two points are worth considering. First, that any society which organises itself on this system takes on the form of caste. The basic requirements are not the presence of Aryans or Dravidians. It has to do with social and economic status, the nature of power and the question of purity and pollution. Secondly, the functional aspect of caste appears to have been *jāti* and not *varṇa*. *Varṇa* appears to have represented the theory of the structure, and may

best be translated by the word, "group". *Jāti* relationships represent the actual way in which society functioned, and this word is better translated as "caste". *Varṇa* became what sociologists have called 'the ritual rank', whereas *jāti* was the indication of the actual status. The *dharma-śāstras*, therefore, when speaking of *varṇa*, were referring to the theory of caste, each *varṇa* representing the ritual ranking of castes, and not necessarily the actual socio-economic status. Every *jāti* was given a ritual rank so that its order in the hierarchy could be easily assigned. Thus the description of the unchanging *varṇa* system in the *dharma-śāstras* does not mean that society remained static and rigid, but refers to the theory of caste organisation remaining constant. The *dharma-śāstras* were socio-legal documents setting out the theory of social and legal organisation. To that extent, they may be compared with the social and economic clauses of the Indian constitution, which represent the theoretical base for Indian society today, but are not a total description of the reality. The separation of theory and practice is a common method by which theory, be it worse or better than practice, remains practically unchanged.

Even if we examine the various groups mentioned in the *varṇa* system, changes are apparent in their actual status and position, often in conformity with broader historical changes. In the Vedic literature, the brahman not only controls the religious ritual but is also associated with political power. However, all brahmans did not have the same status, as is clear from the contempt of the Kuru-Pañcāla brahmans for those from Magadha, to whom they refer as, 'so-called brahmans'.[7] Similarly, the Maga brahmans had a very low status until they became priests

[7] *Jātakas* I. 324, II. 383, III. 232, V. 193.

to some of the kings of northern India[8]. Later sources mention what appears to be a contradiction in terms—the Ābhīra brahman. The Ābhīra were described as a *mleccha* people, the product of a mixture of a brahman and a member of the *āmbaṣṭha* caste.[9] Similarly, a seventh century inscription from south India mentions the Boya brahmans, the Boyas being otherwise listed as a *śūdra* tribe. Evidently the priests, in areas not fully conversant with the Sanskritic tradition, or of tribes recently incorporated into the caste structure, were given the status of brahmans, and assigned a *gotra* but how rad a lank within the status. In the kingdoms of the early period, the brahmans continued to be respected, but their position in the republican states of the same period was insecure. Buddhist sources suggest that they competed with Buddhist monks for the patronage of the wealthy landowners and traders. Clearly, even literary sources cannot be taken for granted. The texts have not only to be compared, but have to be questioned in order to elicit more meaningful information.

Nor were the brahmans confined to priestly functions. That the poorer among them had to take to other skills, such as carpentry, is well-known. For the better-off, administration and ministerial work were also part of their prerogatives—the offices of the purohita and of the ministers being frequently held by them. This probably arose from the fact that some of them were highly literate—as indeed, for the same reason in later centuries, Jaina merchants became statesmen and commanders of the army in many Rajput kingdoms.

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[8] Their low status is mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, Anu Parvan, 90, 11 and Manu III. 162. Their status is more exalted in the *Bhaviṣya Purāna* 1-39 and the *Samba Purāna* 27-28.

[9] Manu X, 15.

The brahman really came into his own in the post-Gupta period, when Buddhism began to decline and the brahman's religious authority was backed both by an economic base and by his indispensability for the legitimation of power. In this period there was a noticeable increase in grants of land and revenue. Some were made to officials in lieu of salary or for services rendered to the king. Others consisted of the *agrahāra* and *brahmadeya* grants, lands and villages granted to individual brahmans or groups of brahmans, in perpetuity. The grant, generally in recognition of learning, for the rendering of religious services, or possibly even for preparing a genealogy of the king, provided income and status, apart from innumerable privileges included in the grant. An example of such a grant, made by a Pallava king and dating to the eighth century A.D. reads:

> "The above is an order of the king dated in the twenty-second year of his reign...the order was issued after the king had been pleased to give Kodukalli village, having expropriated the former owners at the request of Brahma-yuvaraja, having appointed Ghorasharman as the effector of the grant...having excluded the houses of the cultivators...as a *brahmadeya* grant to Shettiranga Somayajin, who belongs to the Bharadvāja, gotra, follows the Chhāndogyasūtra and resides at Puni, we, the inhabitants went to the boundaries which the headman of the district pointed out, circumambulated the village from right to left and planted milk bushes and placed stones around it (to mark the boundaries)...."

There follows a list of dues and taxes from which the donee is exempted:

> "...The donee shall enjoy the wet land and the dry land included within these four boundaries, wherever the iguana runs and the tortoise crawls, and shall be permitt-

ed to dig channels for conducting water . . . The land included within these boundaries we have endowed, with all exemptions which he shall obtain in this village, without paying for the oil-mills and looms, the hire of the well-diggers . . . the share of the headman, the share of the potter . . . the price of ghi, the price of cloth, the share of cloth, the hunters, messengers, dancing-girls, grass, the best cow and the the best bull . . . This grant was made in the presence of the local authorities, of the ministers and of the secretaries . . ."[10]

The grant, inscribed on copper-plates and stamped with the royal seal, became the legal document of the ownership of the land in the brahman's family. A similar procedure was adopted in the grants made to secular officials.

The temple became yet another source of power to the brahman. Early Hindu temples were small shrines in which the image of the deity was housed. But, within a few centuries, after about A.D. 500, they developed into complex institutions built on an extensive and elaborate plan and richly endowed with the revenue of land and villages — apart from the wealth in kind collected through offerings. The management of temple funds was a source of patronage. The temples also became educational centres and provided an institutional base to brahmanical education. This facilitated the spread of ideas in an organised fashion, through the *maṭha* and the temple. The process was almost identical with the earlier pattern of the role of Buddhist monasteries in the society of the pre-Gupta period. Affluence enabled the monasteries and the temples to maintain in their midst free of cost those whose primary interest was scholarship. Thus they frequently became the centres of intellectual debate.

[10] Kasakudi plate of Nandivarman. *South Indian Inscriptions*, II. 3, p. 360.

The kṣatriyas had their problems in adjusting to the [illegible] as is symbolised in the legend of Paraśurāma. [illegible] texts give the kṣatriya greater importance in the [illegible] land-owner and tribal chief. Theoretically, kings [illegible] have been kṣatriyas, yet in the pre-Gupta period [illegible] dynasties are a rarity. The Nandas were śūdra, [illegible] Mauryas are described in brahmanical sources as being [illegible] origin,[11] the Śugṅas were brahmans. The early [illegible] Ceras, Pāṇḍyas and Āndhras were either non-[illegible] or did not claim the status. Those of obviously [illegible] origin, such as the Indo-Greeks, Śakas and Kuṣāṇas [illegible] grudgingly given the status of vrātya or degenerate [illegible] although Pāṇini and Manu refer to the Śakas and Yavanas as śūdras.[12] No attempt was made in the genea-[illegible] recorded in the Purāṇas to hide the non-kṣatriya [illegible] of certain dynasties. In the realm of practical poli-[illegible] was taken for granted that the caste origins of a dynasty formed no bar to its ruling.

After about the fifth century A.D. there were new adminis-[illegible] and agrarian arrangements in many parts of the sub-continent, resulting in a new social framework. A larger number of people of low, unknown or foreign origin gained political power and became rulers of small, independent kingdoms. In many such cases, the over-fanciful descrip-tion of ancestors hints at attempts to hide the genuine beginnings. Thus the Guhilas of Mewar are associated with the Bhils, and the Candella kings with the Gonds. The majority of those claiming Rajput status do not appear initially to have conformed to Aryan culture. Thus, their [illegible] are often associated with non-Sanskritic speech and customs and their social organisation appears to have

11 Pargiter, Dynasties of the Kali Age, p. 25.
12 Manu, X. 44.

been more tribal than based on caste. Many such rulers sought and claimed *kṣatriya* status. This was done by their having genealogies made for themselves by the brahmans. These genealogies linked them to the traditional Sūryavamśi or Candravamśi lineages of the *Purāṇas* and thereby, enhanced their right to call themselves *kṣatriyas*. Political power, as before, remained open and accessible to those well-placed in life but with this difference, that the delicate business of acquiring the appropriate ritual rank was now thought necessary. This was doubtless due to the spread of Sanskritic culture with the brahman grantees acting as its nuclei. These new kingdoms traced their origin either to the brahmans themselves, such as the Parivrājaka dynasty of Bundelkhand; or else, more often to officials who had been awarded grants of land and high office. A Gupta general, Bhaṭārka of the Maitraka clan was appointed governor of Saurāṣṭra. He and his son took the title of *senāpati*, but the third king and his successors, all took the title of *mahārāja*. In the sixth century A.D. they were granting land and had established the independent Maitraka dynasty ruling from Valabhi. From officers, they became feudatory chiefs at which level they played power politics. Ultimately many became independent kings in periods of turmoil and change. Such officers were frequently local persons of influence. Consequently their origins tended to remain obscure. This pattern continued, by and large, in many areas until recent times. Having acquired political authority, sanction was also obtained by ensuring the appropriate caste status. This accounts for the proliferation of *kṣatriya* families in the later period. It was also for this reason, that Udayarāja, the author of a Sanskrit eulogy on Mahmud Begaṛhā, the fifteenth century Sultan of Gujarat, describes this fanatical

convert to Islam as a *kṣatriya* king and the protector of the Hindu *dharma*.

Apart from these channels to political power, there remained the age-old technique of assassination and usurpation. Assassination in pursuit of political power was by no means unknown, a frequently quoted example being that of the last of the Mauryas who was killed by Puṣyamitra Śuṅga, his brahman commander-in-chief, whilst inspecting the troops.

The *vaiśyas* tend to be a rather vague category. In brahmanical sources they remain in the background, but in Buddhist literature, the *seṭṭhi-gahapatis*, the wealthy merchants and traders, the nearest equivalent to the *vaiśya*, play a major role. They are foremost among the patrons of Buddhism and seem to have controlled the economy of the towns. With the establishment of craft and trade guilds, the role of the merchant assumed greater importance.

A striking case of social mobility, almost in direct contradiction to the laws of *varṇa*, comes from a fifth century inscription. It records the building of a temple to Sūrya the sun-god, financed by a guild of silk weavers. The guild migrated from the district of Lāṭa to the city of Daśapura in western Malwa, and prospered to such an extent that it was able to finance a temple. Some members of the guild continued as silk weavers, others took to a variety of professions. The inscription states:

> "... Some of them (became) excessively well-acquainted with the science of archery ... others ... with wonderful tales...others devoted to discourses of the true religion...Some excelled in their own business (of silk weaving); and by others possessed of high aims, the science of astrology was mastered; and even today others of them, valorous in battle, effect by force the

destruction of their enemies. . .(And so) the guild shines gloriously all around. . ."[13]

It is interesting that members of a weaving caste could take up these professions. Yet, their association with the guild continued.

New *jātis* were being constantly formed either by professional groups and guilds taking on a *jāti* status or else by tribes being incorporated as *jātis*. From the ninth century onwards the evidence for this increases. Professional groups of administrators and traders emerge as new castes and some, such as the *kāyastha* and *khatri*, have survived to the present day. The *kāyasthas* or scribes, remained powerful in the administration of northern India throughout the medieval period. Village officials with designations such as *mahattara*, *paṭṭakila* and *gāvuṃda*, mentioned in the inscriptions of the medieval period, occur today as the caste of *mehta*, *patil* or *patel* and *gauḍā*.[14] This process of the creation of new *jātis* has been a continuous one involving not only Hindu castes but, later, even Muslim, Sikh and Christian castes. Among the many tribes who were converted into castes and are listed as such in the *dharma-śāstras* were the Ābhīra, who we are told became *śūdras* through a lack of contact with the brahmans, the Kirātas who were *kṣatriyas* in origin but were reduced to *śūdras* as also were the Puṇḍra the Māgadha and the Oḍra. Among the professional groups which became castes, are mentioned the *ayaskāra* or blacksmiths, the *kulāla* or potters, the *gopa* or herdsmen, the *tantuvāya* or weavers and the *tailika* or oilmen.[15]

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[13] *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* Vol. III, *Inscriptions of the early Gupta Kings*, edited and translated by J. Fleet.

[14] R. S. Sharma, *Social Changes in Early Medieval India*. (Devraj Chanana Memorial Lecture.)

[15] P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, II, pp. 43, 44, 53, 69, 77, 83, 88. For artisans and their *gotras*, see e.g. *Indian Antiquary*, 10. p. 184 and *Epigraphia Indica*, 3, No. 2, p. 6; and for tribes being treated as castes see e.g., *Epigraphia Indica*, 8, No. 24, p. 236.

The picture which emerges does not suggest a rigid and inflexible society, although at the same time it cannot be called an open society. It was flexible and capable of making adjustments, but within limits. It is these constraints on early Indian society which have to be looked at afresh. Generalisations resorting to religion and social custom as being the source of constraints merely describe the situation but do not explain how it arose. It would seem that in some cases at least the constraints may have been determined by a number of factors—ecological, demographic or technological—which may in turn have taken on the garb of religion or social custom on occasion to satisfy those seeking appropriate sanctions. Doubtless the very pace of social change was slow, again largely due to these factors. Status was not sufficient to ensure social and economic security, although the upper castes were very much more secure. Mobility was possible and more generally through a group. In some cases even the individual could move up the social ladder. However, judging by the infrequent reference to this, it would seem that this was not a common occurrence, except in the arena of political power. At the lowest level there was little mobility and little change. The Caṇḍāla, once proclaimed a Caṇḍāla remained a Caṇḍāla.

Evidence suggesting social tension is clear in the Buddhist sources, but less so in the others. It is not surprising to read in the edicts of the emperor Aśoka repeated appeals for harmonious living and the lessening of tension:

> "...On each occasion one should honour another man's sect, for by doing so one increases the influence of one's own sect and benefits that of the other man... Therefore concord is to be commended, so

that men may hear one another's principles and obey them .."[16]

Tribes and professional groups when converted into *jātis* were given a *varṇa* status, a *jāti* rank and, if necessary, assigned a *gotra*. Many were given *śūdra* status and this in part accounts for the striking increase of *śūdra* castes in early medieval India. The laws, customs, marriage and family systems of the tribe often survived its transformation into a caste. The *dharma-śāstras* mention not only the *śāstras*, the Vedic literature and the *Purāṇas* as sources of law, but also the customs and usage of various peoples and professions. For the upper castes, the norms as indicated in the *dharma-śāstras* carried the sanction of law. In many cases the authority of customary law would prevail. This partially explains the lack of a uniform code of laws in India, particularly with reference to the rural areas.

The new castes also brought their religious beliefs and rites with them. These were then grafted onto the main tradition of the new religion which they adopted. Some of the modifications and changes which occur in the evolution of classical Hinduism, such as the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, the cults of various female deities, and also a variety of rites and rituals, can be more adequately explained with reference to the new social groups periodically incorporated into Hindu society. The worship of the Māniyadeo cult by the Candella kings had little to do with Hinduism proper and referred back to tribal days. The function of the caste-*purāṇas* of various castes is to preserve these earlier traditions as well as to link the caste with the known social hierarchy. The priests of such tribes were often given brah-

[16] Twelfth Major Rock Edict. Translated by Romila Thapar in *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, p. 255.

man status—hence the anomaly of the Ābhīra brahman. Even on conversion to another religion, many of these customary practices were continued. The Muslims of Sind, for example, were rarely recognised as Muslims by their more orthodox co-religionists in the medieval period.

Every religion has two inter-connected facets. One is its role as a conserver of the values of the society, or at least that section of society from which it draws its support, and in this it is concerned with belief systems, religious ethics and philosophy. The other is its role as a social institution, bringing together through religious beliefs and practices various groups in society. Throughout Indian history, the inter-relation between religious groups and caste was close, and this was reflected in the relations between religion and social and economic life.

New castes were sometimes created through religious movements. Dissident groups, either rejecting or modifying existing religious ideas, often became separate social groups as, for example, the Jainas, the Buddhists, the Lingāyatas, the Kabirpanthis and the Sikhs. Such religious groups, to begin with, had radical views on society and often claimed to give little or no importance to caste distinctions. But ultimately they were unable to break away completely from the caste organisation. Neither were they sufficiently radical, nor was there the required technological change to support social radicalism. Those with a large following reverted to castes within the group. Those which were small became individual castes. Such religious movements in their early stages inevitably attracted social dissidents as well as those who sought to by-pass their low caste status by joining a movement which purported to have no caste distinctions.

Buddhist and Jaina monasteries, Hindu temples and

maṭhas, Muslim mosques and *khānqahs*, and other religious institutions were all recipients of handsome donations and endowments. Such endowments, when small, provided the necessary financial support for them to be independent. But, when the income increased to large amounts, as it was known to do, some of these religious institutions were forced to participate in economic life. Grants of lands and villages converted the monastery or the temple into a land-owner which gave it economic and political control in the rural areas. The larger monasteries were so richly endowed that they had to employ labourers and slaves for the routine work of the monasteries and for cultivating the lands with which the monastery had been endowed. The use of such labour is clearly referred to in Buddhist texts, and is also mentioned, though perhaps less directly, in Jaina sources.[17] The income for the monastery at Nalanda was provided by an endowment of one hundred villages, which in part explains how it could accommodate so many thousands of students free of cost.[18] Royal patronage was a perennial source of wealth. There are documents to prove that even the emperor Aurangzeb gave endowments to brahmans and to Hindu institutions, such as a Gosain *maṭha* in Champaran.[19] Apart from the personal devotion to a particular religion by a ruler, there was the additional factor, that endowments kept religious organisations satisfied

[17] *Vinaya Piṭaka*, III, 248 ; Apadāna VI, Upali, 24, for references in Buddhist texts. For Jaina sources see, N.R. Premi (ed) *Darśanasāra*, v. 27, p. 12.

[18] S. Beal, *Life of Hsüan Tsang*, p.212. But I Tsing gives the figure as 200 villages—Takakusu, *Records of the Buddhist Religion*, p. 65.

[19] K.K. Datta, *Some Firmans, Sanads and Parwanas*, pp. 30-31. (Basta No. 312 of 1699): endowments to brahmans are referred to on pp. 26, 29, 59, 68, 79, 84, 90, 120.

and thereby decreased the risk of their organising opposition to the ruler. Some of the Delhi Sultans tried to prevent the Sufi *khānqahs* from becoming centres of opposition by making large endowments.

Patronage was also forthcoming from the wealthier landowners and rich merchants. Buddhism and Jainism were closely associated with the commercial profession. There are favourable references to the *seṭṭhi-gahapatis* and the merchants in their literature. Many of the important *stupas* and monasteries were financed by mercantile groups as the inscriptions on these monuments attest, as indeed in later centuries similar groups financed Hindu temples.

The investment in commercial activities, of monetary endowments made to religious institutions, was another link between religious and social groups. It was known for royal families to invest their money in a particular professional guild and the interest from this was donated to a religious institution. An inscription of the second century A.D. from a Buddhist cave at Nasik, reads:

"...In the year 42 ..Uśavadāta, the son-in-law of king Nahapana ..has bestowed this cave on the (Buddhist) *sangha*; he has also given a perpetual endowment of 3,000 *kahāpaṇas* which will serve as cloth money and money for outside life for members of the *sangha*...and those *kahāpaṇas* have been invested in guilds dwelling in Govardhana, 2,000 in one weaver's guild...and 1,000 in another weaver's guild...and those *kahāpaṇas* are not to be repaid, their interest only to be enjoyed...."[20]

Thus a link was established between royalty, the monastery and the guild. This link continued even when the Buddhist monasteries declined and the Hindu temple emerged as the major religious institution. The income of

[20] Nasik Cave Inscription No. 10, *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII, p. 78ff.

the temple was sometimes so huge that it was profitably invested in trading guilds, or else money was loaned with interest to village bodies. In the Cōḻa period, the temple not only supplied a substantial part of rural credit but also financed merchant guilds. The management committees of these temples consisted of the temple priests, the local mercantile guild and the local village assembly. Thus the economic interests of both the temple and the rural and urban professions were interlocked. Apart from investments, a percentage of the donations in kind were used to pay the many hundreds of temple servants employed in the larger temples. The organisation was so complex that in the eleventh century officers were appointed by the Cōḻa king to investigate the financial affairs of the temples.[21] There is a thirteenth century inscription recording a dispute within a temple, in which many of the temple employees struck work.[22]

Trading and banking activities were an important function of a religious sect of northern India in the eighteenth century —the Gosains. They had received endowments of land from the Mughal governors for the maintenance of their *maṭhas*. They developed a network of trade extending over Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and the Deccan. In the course of a legal dispute it was revealed that the *mahant* of one of the Gosain *maṭhas* had left a personal fortune of almost two and a half lakhs, a vast

[21] G.W. Spencer, 'Royal Initiative under Rajaraja I: The Auditing of Temple Accounts'. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, VII, No., 4 Dec. 1970.

[22] R. Nagaswamy, 'South India, Temple as an Employer, *I.E.S.H.R.* II, No. 4, 1965. The particular reference is to the inscription of the Tiruvorriyur Temple dated to Raja Narayana Sambuvataya of śaka 1965.

fortune for those times.[23] And this was by no means unusual. Religious centres often acted as networks of trade both in the towns and the countryside. When the secular activities of the sect began to overshadow the religious ones, it emerged as a new caste.

In view of all this it is difficult to believe that religion and caste stood in the way of economic enterprise. The record of Indian trade and the establishment of trading stations in central Asia and south-east Asia, even in the early period, suggest a healthy pursuit of profit. Those who argue that Hindu culture and caste obstruct economic development base their ideas largely on the texts relating to the philosophical and ethical levels of religion, and then too, they take the texts too literally. In relating the development of capitalism to Christianity in Europe, Max Weber and others focused largely on the puritan and protestant movements of north-western Europe. In the case of Hinduism and Buddhism in India, comparable groups were either ignored or regarded as economically ineffective. Yet what could be more appropriate to the puritan ethic than the words of the Buddha when he says:

> "...The wise and moral man shines like a fire on a hill-top, making money like the bee which does not hurt the flower. Such a man makes his pile as an anthill, gradually. The man grown wealthy thus can help his family and firmly binds his friends to himself. He should divide his money in four parts: on one part he should live, with two expand his trade, and the fourth he should

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[23] F. Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Purnea in* 1809-10, for reference to Gosain activities. The subject is discussed by Bernard S. Cohn. 'The Role of the Gosains in the Economy of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century upper India'. *I.E.S.H.R.*, I, No. 4, 1964.

save against a rainy day."[24]

To emphasise the economic activities of religious groups is not to deny the presence of spirituality in Indian culture. But in any society, eastern or western, genuine spirituality is the concern of the very few. It is true that renunciation as a value does receive more prominence in Indian culture than in most others. Those who were concerned with it generally opted out of society. Yet, of those who renounced life, few lived by it as an ultimate value. Innumerable sects of Hindu sādhus and sanyāsis, Buddhist and Jaina monks, Muslim sufis, failed to totally divorce themselves from the political and economic concerns of society. Some even took to violent means to assert themselves. In the Hindu scheme of life, renunciation comes only in old age, when active involvement in society is no longer possible. In the case of the Buddhists, monastic life involved a socially disciplined existence and the taking on of a new life style. The monastery was not for those seeking total freedom or total renunciation. This was permitted only to the isolated ascetic. Because of the emphasis on renunciation as an ultimate value, those who claimed to have renounced society immediately acquired a charisma and a following. Many of these ended up playing the role of leaders of society and, to that extent, nullifying their renunciation. Those who did succeed in genuine renunciation remain unrecorded. In a sense, it was on the strength of these renouncers that those who claimed to have renounced the world derived their charisma, enabling them to play an active role in worldly affairs.

The spirituality of India, therefore, requires a reappraisal; as do a number of stereotypes relating to the traditional Indian past. The origin of Indian civilisation has to be

[24] *Digha Nikāya*, III, p. 188; tranlsated by A.L. Basham.

traced, not to the Aryan race, but to the inter-action of a number of cultures, of which what have come to be called the Aryan and the Dravidian were the more dominant. The recognition that Indian society changed in the past and reacted to other historical changes may encourage a careful study of the nature of these changes. It can scarcely be maintained, in view of recent evidence, that Indian culture was obsessed with values of other worldliness, which values obstructed economic development. Economic change in precolonial India, in all its aspects, also requires a reassessment.

*LECTURE III**

IN 1853, Karl Marx writing on British rule in India made the following remarks about precolonial Asia:

> "There have been in Asia, generally, from immemorial times but three departments of Government: that of Finance, or the plunder of the interior; that of War, or the plunder of the exterior; and finally, the department of Public Works. Climate and territorial conditions.. constituted artificial irrigation by canals and waterworks the basis of Oriental agriculture. This prime necessity of an economical and common use of water ... necessitated...the interference of the centralising power of government. Hence an economical function devolved upon all Asiatic governments, the function of providing public works..."[1]

Later, in the same article he added :

> "However changing the political aspect of India's past must appear, its social condition has remained unaltered since its remotest antiquity, until the first decennium of the nineteenth century..."[2]

The traditional Indian economic structure was visualised in the shape of a pyramid. The king was at the apex and a large number of self-sufficient village communities at the base. The self-sufficiency derived from the fact that both agriculture and manufacture were located within the same

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* *January 14, 1972.*

[1] 'The British Rule in India' included in the collection entitled, *On Colonialism*, p. 37.

[2] *Ibid*, p. 38.

village community. There was no private property in land. The subjugation of the village community was made possible by the state's control of the public works, particularly the irrigation system. This subjugation was necessary so that the king could extract from the village communities the maximum of their surplus produce. This in turn provided the king and the court with fabulous wealth. The surplus was collected *via* the bureaucracy who performed a managerial function with respect to the public works. The society was static, the economy entirely agrarian and there were practically no towns functioning as centres of trade or manufacture.

I have quoted from Marx because his views sum up the theories prevalent at the time in Europe on oriental despotism and, therefore, on pre-British India. Those who were sympathetic to the Indian past substituted positive adjectives in the description and those who were critical used negative ones. But either way it represented the sum total of knowledge and understanding of the traditional Indian economy. Clearly this was of a minimal kind and heavily prejudiced. Marx's sources, the writings of Elphinstone, Campbell, Richard Jones and contemporary administrative records, all subscribed to this view. The evidence being so limited, few thought of questioning the assumptions. In a later period Marx himself questioned the notion of a continuing and total absence of private property in land. Doubts about the validity of his earlier theory have increased in the light of the investigations made by Marxist historians themselves into the Indian past. On the other hand, the model put forward by Marx is more often used by scholars who by no stretch can be regarded as Marxists. For a while the concept of Oriental Despotism was forgotten. But more recently interest in the debate has revived, both among

Asian and other scholars.[3]

In all societies based on an agricultural economy, a pivotal question is that of land as a factor in historical evolution, land being the continuing and basic economic unit. This relationship can be seen from many perspectives, such as, the proliferation of agrarian village communities and settlements of new land; the question of land-ownership which involves ascertaining not only who owned the land but equally who worked the land and how was the agrarian surplus obtained; yet another aspect is that of revenue collection which implies not only a bureaucracy and its powers but also the attitude of the cultivator to the bureaucracy; and, finally, the technology of agriculture in terms both of farming technology and irrigation systems. All these aspects of an agricultural economy come under consideration in the model of the Asiatic Mode of Production. But in view of the evidence brought to light through historical research in recent decades, this model has to be questioned. However, even if the evidence for the model is now largely inaccurate, the questions it raises are very relevant. Today, with far more evidence, the arguments can be refuted one by one. But to refute the argument by quoting isolated evidence is merely to indulge in polemics, without substantially advancing our understanding of the Indian past. What is required is a systematic historical investigation focusing on key questions.

The village community in India evolved from earlier

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[3] Apart from Karl Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism*—an attempt to apply the earlier theories of Marx—more recent interest in the subject has been expressed in a number of publications such as that of Recherches Internationales in *Premiers Sociétés de classes et Mode de Production Asiatique*, 1967, and that of the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Marxistes in *Sur le 'Mode de Production Asiatique'*, 1967, and the Conference on the Marxist Approach to Social Sciences held at Trivandrum in 1969.

hunting and pastoral communities in some parts of the country as early as the fourth and third millenium B.C., and, in other areas, later. Early tribal society is characterised by primitive agriculture—generally slash-and-burn and the use of the digging stick and the hoe. The land is jointly owned by the tribe, trading contacts are limited and there is a strong sense of tribal identity. The change to a peasant society is generally brought about by a shift to plough agriculture, the beginning of private ownership of land and of trade, with its complement of specialised skills.[4] Permanent settlement is necessary in order to prepare the land for plough cultivation. A decrease in tribal identity is replaced by an identification with a territory and by social divisions which assume increasingly greater significance. The difference between the two systems is reflected, for example, in the *sanghas* or republics and the monarchies of northern India in about the sixth century B.C. The republics, such as those of the Śākyas, Mallas and Licchavis, retained some of their earlier tribal structure with a more egalitarian political system than that in the adjoining kingdoms of Kāśi, Kośala and Magadha. Incidentally, the names of these territories were all originally tribal names.

It is evident from archaeology that both tribal and peasant societies were already in existence, before the arrival of the Indo-Aryan speaking peoples in about 1500 B.C. Plough agriculture can be precisely dated to the pre-Harappan period in the early third millenium B.C. through the excavation of a field with furrow marks dating to this time.[5]

[4] These are very broad characteristics and obviously there would be some variation from type to type. The Angami Nagas for example have since long cultivated carefully terraced rice-fields, though without the plough.

[5] Excavation at Kalibangan in 1967-68.

This clearly provided the agricultural base for the Harappan cities. Plough agriculture is a necessary precondition to the growth of cities since the surplus food required for city populations of high density can only be produced through the plough. The linguistic evidence suggests that the early Aryan speakers took to developed plough agriculture through contact with existing indigenous populations. A number of key words relating to agricultural activities in the Vedic literature appear to be of non-Aryan origin, largely Dravidian and some Munda, as for example *lāṅgala* and *hala* meaning plough, and other words for the hoe (*kuddāla*), the threshing-floor (*khala*), the winnowing-basket (*śūrpa*), the mortar and pestle (*ulūkhala*), and even the common use of the word *palli* for a small village.[6]

The introduction of iron technology had a major economic impact. The thick monsoon forests of the Ganges valley were more easily cleared with iron axes and so more fertile, alluvial land became available for cultivation. The change was particularly important in the cultivation of rice, which was slowly becoming a widespread staple cereal of the sub-continent. The use of the plough, probably iron-tipped, and the iron hoe and a system of controlling the water in the rice-fields, the disputes over which are referred to in Buddhist literature,[7] were among the characteristics of the new agrarian technology. These were the agrarian foundations which culminated in the Mauryan empire.[8]

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[6] T. Burrow, *Sanskrit*, pp. 380-86.

[7] As for example between the Koliyas and Śākyas, *Jātaka*, V. 412-416.

[8] It is of some interest that these new developments are effective primarily in eastern India and southern India. In fact Magadha becomes the nuclear region ultimately culminating in the Mauryan empire.

This new technology developed alongside the spread of the village economy. Private ownership of land emerged in areas where the village economy had been established. To establish possession it became necessary to preserve carefully the family history of the caste or lineage concerned. Hence the need to keep genealogies, for, among other things, the genealogical records of families with property preserved the proof of participation in ownership.

With new areas of land being brought under cultivation in the transition from tribal to peasant societies, it can be assumed that there were periodic increases in the population. The number of habitation sites in the early agrarian settlements of the second and first millennia B.C., shows an appreciable increase, as do the number of cities mentioned in the texts.[9] Peasant economies generally maintain larger populations than tribal economies. Nevertheless, the entire population of the sub-continent being, at most at any time, barely one-fifth or a quarter of the peasant population, there were extensive areas of uncultivated waste land still to be brought under the plough. Kauṭalya in the *Arthaśāstra* advises a systematic settlement of waste land by the state. He writes:

> "The king may settle villages either on earlier habitation sites or in new areas, either by bringing migrants from other states or by encouraging migrations from the thickly populated centres of his own kindgom. The new settlements should consist of not less than a hundred families and not more than five hundred families, primarily of *śūdra* agriculturists. The boundaries of these villages should extend upto one or two *krośa* and should

[9] Early Buddhist literature, for instance, mentions many more cities than does the later Vedic literature.

be so planned that in times of need the villages may be capable of protecting each other."[10]

The Mauryan emperor Aśoka refers to the deportation of a hundred and fifty thousand prisoners of war after the campaign in Kalinga.[11] It is likely that they were used for such settlements. The availability of virgin land explains the ease with which generous grants were made from the fifth century onwards.

Central to the debate on land ownership is the question of private property in land. The stress on the absence of such private property (a crucial argument in the debate on Oriental Despotism) was based on the comments of Sir Thomas Roe, François Bernier and other visitors to India in the Mughal period. This view may have arisen from a confusion of crown lands, which were extensive, with the notion of the king owning all the land. The notion was then extended back in time as well. There is, however, enough evidence now available to show the existence of private property in land with a variety of categories of land ownership and inheritance laws. The problem is best examined by tracing its evolution.

In describing the origin of government or the State, most of the early texts imply that kingship arose out of the need for protection and for the maintenance of law and order. At a later stage the notion of contract was introduced with people paying taxes in return for protection and stability. The theory that taxes were paid as rent to the king is very much a minority view. The Buddha's views on the emergence of private property are very clear as related in the *Dīgha Nikāya.* He explained that there was a time in

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[10] *Arthaśāstra* Book II, Ch. I. Translation by Romila Thapar.
[11] Thirteenth Major Rock Edict.

the past when all was perfection and harmony in society. Everyone was equal and everyone was virtuous. But this condition gradually changed to one of evil. Differences of sex became apparent. People began stealing each other's stock of rice. Ultimately they fought for possession over the women and over the rice fields resulting in a situation of lawlessness. In order to check the chaos, they decided to take action.

> "...Now these beings....gathered themselves together and bewailed these things saying: from our evil deeds, sirs, becoming manifest, inasmuch as stealing, censure, lying, punishment have become known, what if we were to select a certain being, who should be wrathful when indignation is right, who should censure that which should rightly be censured and should banish him who deserves to be banished? But we will give him in return a proportion of the rice..."[12]

A late section of the Śānti Parvan of the *Mahābhārata* also reflects a similar idea.

> "...It hath been heard by us that men in days of old, in consequence of anarchy met with destruction, devouring one another like stronger fishes devouring the weaker ones in the water. It hath been heard by us that a few amongst them, then assembling together, made certain compacts saying. 'He who becomes harsh in speech, or violent in temper, he who seduces or abducts other people's wives or robs the wealth that belongs to others, should be cast off by us'. For inspiring confidence amongst all classes of people they made such a compact and lived for some time..."[13]

[12] *Dīgha Nikāya, III*, 93 ff. Translation in *Sacred Books of the Buddhists*. IV, p. 88 ff.

[13] *Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parvan, 67, 19-24. Translated by P.C. Roy.

The narrative continues that the compact did not work out and eventually they requested Manu to become king. Manu agreed only on condition that a stipulated amount in taxes should be paid to him for performing this function.

Whatever the process of the emergence of the state as described in these texts, its purpose was to protect the people as well as the institutions of family and private property and to maintain law and order. This was the justification, in the main, for paying taxes to the state, or to the king who symbolised the state. In the post-Gupta period references to the sale of land to individuals, increase. Inscriptions dating to the period after the sixth century A.D. frequently refer to the purchase of land and the transfer of property.[14] Mention of disputes over boundaries of land are negligible in the early *sūtra* literature and are first mentioned as a major concern in Manu.[15] Thereafter, judging by the evidence of the later *dharma-śāstras*, problems relating to land disputes became increaingly complex. After about the twelfth century A.D. the laws of inheritance even with reference to land had become extremely complicated, as is evident, for example, in the Dāyabhāga and Mitākṣarā systems.

Buddhist texts frequently refer to wealthy land-owners. Equally often are mentioned the *dāsa* and the *bhṛitaka*, the slaves and the hired labourers who worked the land for them. That they were employed in large numbers is clear from the references to them made by Asoka, who frequently in his edicts expresses concern for their well-being. Brahmanical literature often speaks of the culti-

[14] A recent and detailed study of the inscriptions from Bengal is available in B. Morrison, *Political Centres and Culture Regions in East Bengal*. Similar conditions are recorded in inscriptions from other parts of India.

[15] Manu, VIII, 245-266; also Viṣṇu V. 172; Nārada XI.

vators as *śūdras*. This was an all-enveloping term. It included the cultivator and the artisan as also the slave and the hired labourer. Basically, the *śūdra* was the primary producer. The existence of the *śūdra* precluded the need for widespread slavery for rural and urban production. Nevertheless the imperial system of the Mauryas used slaves in state enterprises.

A new avenue to land ownership emerged in the early centuries A.D. and gradually by the post-Gupta period became so predominant that it changed the nature of land relations. These were the land grants to brahmans and secular officials. The secular grantees took titles such as *sāmanta, rauta, ṭhākkura*. The most commonly used was *sāmanta* whose meaning had changed from 'a neighbour' to 'a subordinate ruler'.[16] These grants eventually came to be treated as hereditary and formed the core of a number of later-day kingdoms. The new system introduced political decentralisation, a further breaking-up of tribal ties and a re-iteration of land as the major form of wealth. It encouraged local ties and loyalties, centering on the region and on the *sāmanta*. This basic pattern of land grants as an avenue to power, which matured at the end of the first millennium A.D., survived until the colonial period when the structure of land relations was radically altered. Thus the *sāmanta* was, in a sense, the ancestor of the *muqti* of the Sultanat and the *jagirdar* of the Mughals. The concentration of the economic and political control in the hands of the few and, for the most part, the royal dispensation of land grants, account for some of the features which were misunderstood and woven into the concept of Oriental Despotism.

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[16] R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, p. 24 ff. L. Gopal, "Sāmanta, its varying significance in Ancient India", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Parts 1 and 2, April 1963.

Administrative office had now a greater potential as a channel of power. Previously the salaries of the officers of the government had been computed in cash. The *Arthaśāstra* informs us that the minister should be paid 48,000 *paṇas* per annum and the staff of accountants and writers were each to be paid 500 *paṇas*, thus giving a ratio of 96 : 1. Well might Kauṭalya add: "...With this income they are not likely to weaken before temptation or give way to discontent .."[17] With land being granted in lieu of a salary, it became the base for power. In the absence of an impersonal recruitment to an administrative service, local persons tended to be appointed to office and the grants therefore further strengthened their local standing.

In general, the legal texts suggest that the tax to be collected by the state from the cultivator should be one-sixth, *ṣaḍbhāga*.[18] So consistent is the association of this amount with land revenue, that sometimes the king is referred to as the *ṣaḍbhāgin*.[19] However, other sources mention the higher figure of one-fourth.[20] The tax was by no means uniform and varied according to the quality of the land and the nature of the produce. In some periods, there appear to have been separate taxes on the land and on the produce. The post-Mauryan period saw a gradual increase in the number of taxes: in addition, there was now the growing imposition of the *viṣṭi*, forced labour, which tended in later centuries to be unpaid. *Viṣṭi* was extracted mainly from the primary producers—the *śūdra*, *dāsa*, *bhṛitaka* and the craftsmen and artisans. When the system of land grants became common, it was the grantees

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[17] *Arthaśāstra*, Book V. Ch. 3. Translation by Romila Thapar.
[18] Manu VII, 308; Viṣṇu III. 24; Nārada XVIII, 48.
[19] *Arthaśāstra*, Book II, Ch. 15; Viṣṇu III, 22.
[20] Megasthenes, *Indica*, XI; Diodorus II, 40; Strabo, XV. i. 40.

who benefited from a wide range of taxes. Increasing taxes must certainly have been a heavy burden on the cultivator. However, the simple equation of increasing taxes equals oppression cannot be applied without scrutinising other factors. During the reign of Akbar, for example, the demand rose to one-third. This was not just an irresponsible step merely to collect additional revenue, since there is evidence to suggest that there had been an increase in agricultural production and a high index of consumption.[21] In the early period, improved irrigation and the extension of the area under cultivation would have been two ways of increasing agricultural production.

There is on the whole a notable absence of reference to peasant rebellions in early India, although legends involving popular revolts are frequent. Given the availability of cultivable land, peasant migration appears to have been the more common form of alleviating the pressures of heavy taxation. But this was only effective in small kingdoms, or along the borders, when it was feasible to migrate rapidly into another area under a different political control. We are told that the people of south Pañcāla on one occasion, fled to north Pañcāla, because of oppressive taxation.[22] Buddhist sources mention the organisation of political opposition to a ruler or to an oppressive bureaucracy,[23] an example of the later being the revolt of the people of Taxila against Mauryan officials.[24] Brahmanical sources, on the whole, discourage the notion of popular revolts and restrict legitimate revolt to the brah-

[21] Ashok Desai, "Population and Standard of living in Akbar's Time". (Unpublished paper).

[22] *Divyāvadāna*, p. 435-437, also *Mahābhārata*, Vana Parvan, I. 92.

[23] *Jātaka*, III, 513; V., 156.

[24] *Aśokāvadāna*, in J. Przyluski, *La Legende de l'Empereur Açoka*, p. 232. p. 106.

mans and the *kṣatriyas*. These were not revolts so much as the removal of a king. But against a wicked or useless king, revolt was morally justified. The fact that the cultivators were not permitted to arm themselves, even in an emergency, must also have acted as a serious check on peasant revolts.[25] Where revolt was not possible nor migration easy, dissident religious movements were a means of expressing peasant discontent. More recent examples were the Satnami movement in the eighteenth century and the tribal movement of Birsa Munda in Chhota Nagpur at the end of the nineteenth century.

After the introduction of plough cultivation the major technological changes would relate to irrigation. In the concept of Oriental Despotism, irrigation plays a central role, on the assumption that the land was arid and the climate dry in India, thus making irrigation a necessary prerequisite of cultivation; furthermore, a control of the hydraulic machinery by the state would ensure a control over agricultural production and therefore over revenue. However, the historical evidence indicates that, barring a few exceptions, irrigation was largely the concern of private land-owners and village councils, since the prevalent forms of irrigation were wells, tanks and river channels. None of these required state organisation, but all of them required local co-operation.

In the early period the evidence of state enterprise in this matter is the construction of canals in Kalinga by the Nandas and of the Sudarśana lake in Kathiawar by the

[25] Megasthenes, *Indica*, XXXIII; Manu, VIII, 348.

[26] Hathigumpha Inscription of Kharavela, in R. Mitra, *Antiquities of Orissa*, II, p. 16 ff. Reference to the Mauryan dam on the Sudarśana lake is made in the Junagadh inscription of Rudradamān, *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII, p. 36ff. The dam was destroyed by storm and flood, but was repaired in the second century A.D.

Mauryan government.[26] This was the period of the initial expansion of the village economy with the centralised, Mauryan government playing a major role. Not surprisingly, it also coincides with or at any rate precedes the writing of the *Arthaśāstrā*, the text par excellence on revenue collection and taxation. After a long lapse of many centuries, there is again evidence from the tenth century A.D. of the state taking an interest in irrigation works. In Kashmir, Suyya, in spite of his *śūdra* associations, rose to be a minister and constructed a dam by which the floods in the Kashmir valley could be controlled.[27] None of these areas—Kathiawar, Kalinga or Kashmir—played a major role in Indian history at a sub-continental level even during the periods when they had extensive state-organised irrigation. Tamilnadu, on the other hand, shows an impressive continuity both as a nuclear area historically and in its concern with irrigation, starting with the tanks and catchment areas of the megalithic culture. Yet this region is subject to the south-west and north-east monsoon and consequently can hardly be described as having a dry climate and arid soil conditions. In Tamilnadu and Mysore, canals were built by the Cōḷa and Vijayanagara kings, in the former case to control the floods of the Kaveri river. But, far from resulting in a despotic control over the cultivator, Tamilnadu experienced perhaps the maximum decentralisation of administration. The village assemblies of this area, the *ur* and the *sabhā*, although they represented the prosperous cultivators and were more active in the *agrahāra* villages, nevertheless controlled the local irrigation facilities, mainly in the nature of tanks. Lengthy inscriptions on large numbers of temple walls, describing the functioning of these assemblies, do

[27] Kalhana, *Rājataraṅgini*, V. 73, 80-91, 110-112.

not give the impression of their being subservient to the king's officers.[28] It is interesting that the period of state concern with irrigation coincided with an increase in the system of land-grants Characteristic of these grants was not merely political decentralisation but also an increase in the immunities bestowed on the grantees by which the lands were made comparatively free from interference by royal officials.[29] It would be more relevant therefore to analyse the role of individuals and institutions owning land and their use of the hydraulic machinery, rather than concentrating attention on the state.[30]

It has been suggested that the introduction of what has come to be called the Persian wheel in northern India was, to begin with, limited to the more affluent villages and land-owners who could afford the expense.[31] The state had little to do with it. The state did however distinguish between irrigated and non-irrigated land and where it provided irrigation it collected an irrigation cess. Where irrigation was maintained by the cultivator himself, the *Arthaśāstra* recommends a remission of taxes.[32] The choice of a particular irrigation system, be it tanks, wells or canals, depended on the geography of the region and the ecology at the time. It is interesting that in the early period the purpose of state enterprises in irrigation is generally explained as the need for flood control. Such irri-

[28] e.g., the Uttaramerur inscription in the *Archaeological Survey of India Report*, 1904-5. pp. 138 ff.

[29] R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, pp. 135-209.

[30] For comparison with the evidence from Ceylon, see, L. Gunawardene, 'Irrigation and Hydraulic Society in Early Medieval Ceylon', in *Past and Present*, No. 53, November 1971.

[31] Irfan Habib, 'Distribution of Landed Property in pre-British India'. Enquiry, II, 3/12, Winter 1965.

[32] *Arthaśāstra*, Book II, Ch. 24.

gation systems in any case had a limited geographical reach. For an increase in the state's revenue, the remedy often suggested is double-cropping.

Over-emphasis on the agrarian base of the Indian economy in early times undermines on occasion the role of commercial activities as the mainspring of the economy in some areas and during certain periods. To maintain that there was an absence of towns functioning as centres of commerce and trade, is also contrary to the evidence. In the maritime states and some parts of the hinterland, the revenue from trade was as fundamental as was the revenue from land in other parts of the subcontinent. In addition trade was a precondition to the urbanisation of various parts of India at various periods. The economy of urban centres, such as those of the Harappa culture, was essentially based on trade with Sumer and the ports of the Persian Gulf. The dockyard at Lothal and the terracotta model of a ship provide indications of maritime technology. Within the sub-continent, rivers such as the Ganges had been arteries of trade. It was in part to control the river trade that Magadha went to war against Kāśi, Kośala and the confederacy of the Vrijji tribes in the sixth century B.C. Traders and goods traversed the sub-continent on the network of roads built by the Mauryan administration. The black, polished luxury pottery produced in the middle Ganges valley reached as far afield as Taxila in the north and Amarāvati in the south. The woollen blankets of Gandhāra were famous throughout India as were the pearls from the Pāṇḍyan kingdom at Madurai. The use of money and the extensive use of a script by the third century B.C. facilitated far reaching trade.

Roman ships leaving from the ports of the Red Sea and

using the monsoon winds sailed across the Arabian sea to the ports of the south Indian kingdoms of the Ceras. Pāṅḍyas and Cōḷas, in the first century B.C. Here the Romans set up trading stations. Cargoes, such as textiles of various kinds. spices and semi-precious stones, were shipped back to Egypt and from there on to Rome. Sometimes the cargo included apes and peacocks, both of which were fancied as pets by the Roman partrician ladies. The Romans paid for these goods in gold coins which have been found in hoards all over the peninsula.[38] It is no wonder that Pliny, the Roman historian, complains of the luxury trade with India draining the Roman treasury. The economic base of the early south Indian kingdoms, partially established on the iron technology of the megalithic culture, was strengthened as a result of this trade.

The traders of northern India had two areas to tap. One was the eastern Mediterranean with routes going *via* Afghanistan and Iran, which had been used since earlier times. In addition they now ventured into central Asia and ultimately into China. The gold coins of the Kuṣāna kings of the early centuries A.D., are in a sense symbolic of this trade, as also the striking prosperity of Kuṣāna levels at exacavated sites. Buddhist missionaries followed the traders into central Asia and China, and this was the beginning of the spread of Buddhism into these regions. The continuity of this trade was broken at times with the activity of the Huns, or Hūnas, as they are known to Indian sources, as also later the Turks and the Mongols. The impact of this break was felt on the urban economy of northern India.

It was also in the early centuries A.D. that Indian traders searching for further sources of spice and for new markets

[38] R. E. M. Wheeler, *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers.*

arrived in south-east Asia. Merchants from Orissa, south India, Gujarat and Bengal travelled to various parts of south-east Asia and some are even known to have settled there. This in turn brought to Indian traders the profits of a south-east Asian trade. It was again south-east Asian trading interests which helped to precipitate a major naval expedition in the eleventh century by the Cōḷa king against the kingdom of Śrivijaya in Sumatra and Java. Western India maintained continuous trading relationships with west Asia which facilitated the arrival of the Arabs on this coast.

Financiers, both individual bankers and trade guilds, profited from trade. Money was not to be kept idle. Usury was a legitimate, economic activity. The sources mention 15% per annum as the normal rate of interest on money lent for trading purposes and this figure remained constant over many centuries.[34] The *Arthaśāstra* suggests an exhorbitant rate of 240% for overseas trade,[35] which later was reduced by half and, still later, further lowered when overseas trade became safe. Whether or not such high rates were actually charged, the traders were not deterred. Although the volume of trade in each region was not uniform throughout the centuries, nevertheless, the prosperity deriving from trade is evident in various parts of the country in different periods. This prosperity enabled the merchants and guilds to become patrons of art and religion. A sizeable part of the cultural heritage from ancient and medieval India derives from not only the patronage, but also the ethos of urban society. In the early period commerce was not as direct an avenue to political power as was land. Kauṭalya seems to see the

[34] Manu VIII, 141 suggests varying rates according to caste—24 per cent for the *brāhman*, 36 for the *kṣatriya*, 48 for the *vaiśya* and 60 for the *śudra*.

[35] *Arthaśāstra*, Book III, Ch. 2.

merchant primarily as yet another source of revenue for the state. In contrast, the role of the guild and the merchant in later centuries was one of considerable economic and social authority, together with a close association with political power.

Indian trade related not only with the local economy, but also with the broader pattern of Asian trade. This pattern began to be disrupted by the arrival of the Portuguese at the end of the fifteenth century, followed by a succession of European trading companies. These ushered in what was finally to become a period of colonialism, resulting in a radical change in the direction which Indian history was taking.

The economic structure of early India has to be viewed from two perspectives. One is the continuing process of the change from tribal economy to peasant economy and the extension of the agrarian economy. This has been taking place throughout the centuries of Indian history. In some parts of central and eastern India it still continues, and to that extent it cuts across any easy periodisation of Indian history. The other perspective relates to the nature of the agrarian and commercial activity. The two economic thrusts which carried Indian civilisation into new areas were the expansion of the agrarian economy and of trade. The former was limited to the sub-continent. The opening up of plains and river valleys to plough agriculture often seems to coincide with the extension of the geographical reach of Indian civilisation as well as to changes within its structure in each new area of expansion. Trade, playing a similar role, reached areas outside the sub-continent as well, as we have seen. The changes in the structure relate to technology, administrative forms, social groups, religious movements, in fact to every aspect of the activity of a society.

Tracing the inter-relationships is an attempt to see which of these facets played a pre-dominant part on what occasion, for historical facts are no longer viewed as isolated islands in an ocean of time.

In the conventional study of our past it was tended to be assumed that the theoretical aspect was the reality. Consequently we have frequently misunderstood our past, or, what is worse, treated it either as a fossil, or as a perfect cast whose mould has been broken. The supposed perfection of the past has hampered our understanding not only of the social processes but also of our own cultural identity. To study technology and the economy is not to deny the importance of cultural achievements, but rather to try and place them in the total context of a society. We have tended to visualise Indian culture as existing in a vacuum, without giving adequate attention to the foundations on which that culture was built.

The cultural identity which we have forged in recent times has been that of a Sanskritic upper caste, or else its equivalent in a Persian upper caste. Yet, these identities are as elitist as the English speaking identity of contemporary Indians. For, a very small percentage of the population spoke Sanskrit or Persian itself. Even the royal ladies of the court were not permitted to speak Sanskrit in the classical plays and conversed entirely in Prākrit. The fact that many of the *prākrits* and later the regional languages, drew heavily on Sanskrit, did narrow the language difference between the elite and the rest, but not to the extent of this difference being socially unimportant. It is significant that the political patronage of Sanskrit in the ancient period emanated from the foreign rulers of western India and was given currency as the official language by the Guptas and by the new *kṣatriyas*. Some of these dynasties used this patronage

either to integrate themselves into the local society, as did the Śakas, or else as a status symbol, as did those who in later centuries performed the *aśvamedha* sacrifice The earliest Sanskrit inscription of any importance is that of the Śaka ruler Rudradāman, and dates to the second century A.D., the previous inscriptions having been composed in the *prākrits* and the local languages, such as Aramaic and Tamil. The adoption of Sanskrit even as the language of the royal courts can be precisely dated from the evidence of the inscriptions. For example, in the south, this dates to the Pallava period, from about the sixth century A.D. onwards. Similarly, the Ahoms who established themselves in Assam in the thirteenth century originally issued their charters in the Ahom language and gradually took to using Sanskrit as well. In many of these cases, the operative part of the inscription, which made it a legal document, was composed in the local language, the Sanskrit portion providing the literary frills.

The common features of religion for the majority of Indians lie in the worship of the mother goddess and the fertility cults and in the teachings of what have come to be called the devotional or *bhakti* sects and the '*sant*' and the '*pir*'. Emphasis is continually given by historians to the spread of Hinduism as reflected in the Sanskritic tradition and to the spread of Islam symbolised by the Qurān. Yet, so little recognition is given to the fact that in the practice of religion it is the local cult, the non-Sanskritic tradition which is often predominant. Even the erotic sculpture of Khajuraho and Konark symbolises the fertility cult of the elite, and not what we have tried to make of it—the spiritual union of the *ātman* with the *Brahman*. Erotic sculpture served a magico-religious function as a symbol of fertility which was believed to be auspicious. It reflects the widespread

influence of Tantric practices at many levels of society. And, since Hinduism never subscribed to the 'guilt' complex, arising from original sin as in the Semitic religions, erotic sculpture was not regarded as something perverse or sinful.

It is in the periods of the small kingdoms and not of the grand empires that the local tradition asserts itself. The Sanskritic tradition has had to undergo change in order to adjust to the non-Sanskritic tradition, until the nineteenth century when a new reading was given of the meaning of a Sanskritic tradition, and this was sought to be propagated. But even in the nineteenth century, the understanding of it reflected the social needs of that time and the necessity to react to Christianity and western concepts, rather than the original.

To suggest that the cultural identity should be more than merely Sanskritic, is not just to turn an old stereotype upside down. The alternative is not that instead of glorifying the supposed Aryan race and Sanskritic culture, the attempt now should be to glorify some so-called non-Aryan race and a non-Sanskritic culture, with the concept of race still deriving from a language. A popular culture cannot be built on the negative postulate of anti-brahmanism. This merely becomes a self-destroying myth.

The dynamics of Indian society was the juxtaposition of precept to practice, of the organisation of life as it should be, to the organisation of life as it is. For every aspect of life, from the most mundane to the most exhilarating, there was a theory of functioning which did not necessarily reflect the reality. The theory was the ideal image, worked out on the most careful classification of every detail and with all contingencies accounted for. The resulting dichotomies were not forced into confrontation but were adjusted. This perhaps constitutes what may be called the spirituality of

India. Such adjustments seem easier in pre-industrial societies whose cultures invariably appear to be more gentle, meditative and less competitive, conforming to the description which we give to our spiritual values. The technological basis of industrialisation is qualitatively very different from any other technological change in history. It effects change more intensively and more extensively. It magnifies the disparities and begets sharp confrontations within a society. The experience of colonialism forced India to become a participant in the industrialisation of Britain and to that extent has brought it into the process of industrialisation in a manner specific to colonial situations.[36] It is this which has twisted the confrontation into the false dichotomy of Indian versus western. The problem, in fact, is to terminate this dichotomy and to comprehend the historical movement from one type of society towards another.

An analysis of the totality of Indian society today has to account for a variety of transitions taking place and involving tribal groups, peasant groups, and, at the most articulate level, the change to industrialisation. The nature of these changes will often involve a basic change of social values. The confrontation can no longer be evaded as it once was by recourse to the theory that our concern has always been only with things spiritual, or by an escape into the past. But the process can be facilitated by an awareness of the past, deriving from a realistic assessment.

History has often been used in the search for an identity. Each contemporary group seeks its own identity in the past, which fragmentation of identities distorts the image. It would be unfortunate if in our search for an Indian identity

[36] Bipan Chandra, Presidential Address—Modern Indian History Section, in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Jabalpur, 1970.

from the past, we ultimately limit our vision and comprehension to the image of the past as it has emerged during the colonial period. For it is only the awareness that history is made by an entire people in its total activity, which can bring us nearer to explaining the past in its concrete actuality. And this, after all, is the ultimate purpose of historical investigation.